



A BRIEF LOOK AT

Mystic Revelation of Rastafari



CULTURAL MUSICAL GROUP



A scene from African Liberation Celebration - National Arena, 1976

THE MYSTIC REVELATION OF RASTAFARI

The Mystic Revelation of Rastafari (MRR) is no ordinary cultural group but holds a unique position in Jamaica's musical stage. Sheer musical technique, religious philosophy and community involvement all find harmonic blend in the MRR group which has operated out of a base in east Kingston for the past 30 years and has added a new and qualitative dimension to Jamaica's music over the years.

What was to evolve as the MRR was founded in the late 1940s by Count Ossie. Ossie claims and others who lived closely to him attest that he, Count Ossie was the originator of a relatively young but already traditional Rastafari music. He said it all began down in the Salt Lane area of what was known as the Dungle — a slum heap in Western Kingston. Ossie said he used to hold discussions with other youths about national hero Marcus Garvey and the whole question of black awareness.

Among those taking part was the master *burru* drummer Brother Job. Discussions led to the conclusion that blacks in the western hemisphere had to discover and develop their own culture. The argument went further that *burru* music (an old type of African music used during slavery) was one of the few undiluted African forms alive in Jamaica and it should be adopted. Count Ossie learned to play the *burru* drums during these sessions.



House - leading musicians who later merged with Count Ossie to become Mystic Revelation of Rastafari

OPEN HOUSE FOR MUSICIANS

He introduced the music to his Rastafari bretheren and a musical group evolved concentrating on singing, dancing and drumming. Count Ossie moved to east Kingston after the devastating hurricane of 1951 in Jamaica and set up his famous camp at 32 Adastral Road. Here brethren came from all over to learn the rhythms of Count Ossie's drummers and take back to their communities. The centre operated also as a kind of open house for all musicians to come together and jam together in a cross fertilization of rhythms. The names of those passing through read like a who's who of Jamaica's outstanding figures in pop and jazz music — Don Drummond, Tommy McCook, Roland Alphonso, Ernie Ranglin, Jackie Mittoo, Jackie Willacy, Randy Weston, Millie Small to name just a few.

An important dimension to the group's musical repertoire was added when the horns of T. Cedric Brooks and the Mystics joined with Count Ossie's drummers to become the Mystic Revelation of Rastafari.

Brethren still reminisce fondly on those early days when university intellectuals and handcart pushers, musical novices and virtuosos, holy men and charlatans, men of professions and men of questionable employment met and interacted under a banner of mutual respect and peace. This was the way Count Ossie ran his camp.

Today the MRR consists of 20 members — drummers, singers, dancers and a poet. The group's music is predominantly African. The innovative rhythm of the drums and dances stylizes Jamaica's rich African heritage, the struggles of its people, the religious experiences of the Rastafari religion with its message of peace and love, the deification of Haile Selassie, its insistence on redeeming the African heritage of black people in the west who are descendants of slaves and its preaching of repatriation to Africa. Performances range from a complete history being dramatized in song, dance and music to sequences of dance, poetry, songs and historical data on Africa and the Caribbean.

OWES MUCH TO AFRICA

Marjorie Whyllie of the Jamaica School of Music writes, the music of the MRR is as Jamaican as the Rastafarian 'brethren' themselves. The rhythm owes much to Africa, the bass owes much to the liberalizing influence of people like John Coltrane. But the total sound of the group is wholly indigenuous — the combination of a driving pulse and a profound emotional conviction that their music speaks truly for them. If you listen to these drums analytically, instead of with the whole body and heart, you'll hear how complex the structure is . . ."

Another writer has described their music as being "rooted and grounded in the obsessive, corporal rhythm of the Rasta drum beat" but which nevertheless "reflects in its horn lines a freedom of imagination that from the beginning bypassed all the laws of western tonality and at the same time . . . unfolded in the unmetrical rhythms of pre-Renaissance and non-western musical cultures."

Yet another description — "an unreal explosion of African drums, driving reggae rhythms, Coltrane-like saxophones and soulful black voices singing and chanting."

The influence of the MRR on Jamaican popular music made itself felt in the late 50s when they provided background rhythms for the Ffolkes Brothers *Oh Carolina*, a song which became a famous classic of the ska era. Ever since *Oh Carolina*, Rasta rhythms have been used by other local musicians through the rock steady period and into the reggae period where it now flourishes.

THREE KINDS OF DRUMS

Rastafari music traditionally uses three kinds of drums - the bass drum fashioned somewhat like a regular military band bass drum, but with heads protruding slightly over the rims; the *funde* which is a longish narrow drum made of ram goat skin and is held together by metal pegs and braces; and the *repeater*, the smallest drum made of ewe's skin. The bass drum is held on the lap and hit with a heavily padded stick; the *funde* standing on the floor is played usually with the fingers of both hands in closed position while the *repeater* is played usually with the finger tips in open position and the outer edges of the hand. These two drums are usually cradled on or between the knees of the seated player. With the exception of the *repeater* the centre of the drums are hit at all times.

Two albums have been made by the MRR so far - *Groundation* and *Tales of Mozambique*. The group has taken part in annual Festival of Arts in Jamaica and were the recipients of gold medals in the field of drumming in 1965 and 1966. Its late leader and founder Count Ossie was given national honours for his contribution to cultural development in Jamaica.

OVERSEAS TOURS

The group made several overseas tours including participation in major cultural events. The MRR performed in the first Caribbean Festival of Arts – Carifesta – in Guyana in 1972, and the second in Jamaica in 1976. It was invited to take part in the Newport Jazz festival but because of some unexpected delay was unable to do so. It has toured Trinidad, the United States



Eleven members of the M.R.R. performing at the Mass Communications Centre at Hamburg University - Saarbrücken (W. Germany) Oct. 1979

(with performances at Howard University, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and other venues) and Canada. In 1979 they toured the Federal Republic of Germany and Norway, the latter at the invitation of the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation and Club 7 Oslo.



Lyn Wilks - lead dancer (M.R.R.) during dance workshop in Frankfurt - Germany Nov. 1979



Count Ossie's 2nd to last appearance with the group. (CARIFESTA '76 National Arena before his tragic accident)

The members have performed with several internationally recognized artists both locally and abroad including Duke Ellington, Nina Simone and Miriam Makeba. They have performed for many visiting heads of state and official delegations in Jamaica including Haile Selassie in 1966, Samora Machel in 1977 and the World Council of Churches in 1979.



Group's Manager- Samuel Clayton, extreme right with Miriam Makeba and the late Count Ossie

But performances are not for dignitaries alone. From time to time the MRR holds concerts for members of the community and others so that those who cannot afford to pay can still get the benefit of their cultural exposition. In 1980 the group was involved in an exchange programme with the African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica. Members attended lectures on African culture at the Institute and in return gave a number of performances at the Institute's venue.

All these activities express the positive beliefs MRR members hold on the importance of cultural development.



Manager of M.R.R. - Samuel J. Clayton

"Love is the cohesive force that binds all events to make life purposeful for man to keep on living."

FROM BROTHER SAM CLAYTON

LOVE AND LIFE

"We are a cultural group whose concept is based on love and life; love the cohesive force that binds all events to make life purposeful for man to keep on living. If it was not for love, mankind could not reach the stage of progress which we now enjoy, and if it was not for war mankind would reach further and closer to the zenith of life which is life ever loving." This is one of the statements from the MRR outlining their philosophy. There is no concert, no music played by this group without some "reasoning", some message about the central direction of man's life usually given by Brother Sam Clayton, who bears the designation philosopher and orator. Music and dance to them are a means of communication.

"We do not consider ourselves entertainers," says MRR bassist and poet Ras Joe, "But as communicators."

Prime Minister Michael Manley of Jamaica in an address to the MRR at the opening of the music school there, outlined the importance of cultural development for total self-awareness and ultimately national development.



P.M. opening M.R.R. music school and new education wing in 1977

"The most serious consequence of imperialism working through slavery," he stated, "was the conscious attempt to destroy in the consciousness of Africans, their own sense of identity . . . The man who loses himself loses faith. The man who loses his faith loses his confidence. The man who loses his confidence loses the capacity for communal action."

COMMUNAL WORK

The Prime Minister went on to praise the late Count Ossie and the brethren of the MRR for their communal work as testified by the erection of the MRR community centre (a Registered Cooperative). Though longing for repatriation, the MRR



A section of the library in the M.R.R. Centre

members recognize that their art is nourished by their community with embraces different beliefs. However, they feel a kinship with all African peoples wherever they are, and live a life of communal sharing. They also realize that not all members of the community will wish to repatriate to Africa physically but feel that all who wish to stay should be better off than before. Hence the emphasis on skill training at the centre. There is also a basic school, a women's craft group and a branch of the Jamaica library service housed at the community centre which is run along cooperative lines.

It is a combination of community consciousness, the desire for repatriation and the philosophical concept of cultural exchange which has led the members to undertake a tour of Africa in 1980. The tour is to be part of a project whereby



*M.R.R. Community Development project:
Tribute to Marcus Garvey (statue erected in 1978) Apex Park - Glasspole Ave.*

members help put up cultural centres in different countries to be the venue for future cultural exchanges between Jamaica and African countries. As part of this exercise interests in Africa would provide certain infra-structure while members of the MRR would impart some of their technical and musical skills.

CULTURAL EXCHANGE

Their philosophy of cultural exchange is summed up in their own words: "In making use of the cohesiveness of love to motivate our community on the purposefulness of life, the presence and sacred duty of each individual we feel through cultural exchange will not just express secular or national cultures, but will bind all events to put us one step further in the achievement of global cultural activities for world peace."



Count Ossie Jr. - Taking time out from his drums to move with dancer .

